

Testimony of David Blitz in Favor of Bills HR 5545, 6403 and 997

My name is David Blitz. I have been a faculty member at Central Connecticut State University since 1989 and am now in my 32nd year. I have been Department Chair (Philosophy), Program Director (Honors Program) and Program Coordinator (Peace Studies) at the University. I have also served as Chair of the University Planning and Budget Committee and as a member of the Faculty Senate Steering Committee. I am currently vice-Chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee to the Board of Regents and a member of the Finance and Infrastructure Committee of the Board. I wish to comment on three of the pending bills, which I will do briefly in these remarks; please see my written testimony as well. I am in favor of all three of: (1) HB 5545 (budget of the CSCU), (2) HB 6403 (mergers or closings within the CSCU), and (3) HB 997 (expansion of voting rights of faculty members of the BOR).

1/ I want to speak in favor of HR 5545, “AN ACT CONCERNING THE BUDGET OF THE CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.” The current breakdown of the budget for CSCU at the level of the governor’s and legislature’s budgets does not transparently reflect the significantly increased (in fact doubled since 2017) budget allocations to and controlled by the central CSCU System Office.

I note that in the Governor’s February 2021 Budget Proposal for the FY 2022-FY 2023 Biennial Budget year, that the Agency Summary (p. B-69, PDF page 163) is for a total of \$321.5 million dollars for FY 2022, an increase of 1.5 million over the estimated FY 2021. However, the categories of this line item breakdown are not as transparent as they should be, and this should be reflected in the budget statement, as proposed by HR 5545 .

Reading the current line items, one has the impression that all of the \$307.2 million of the \$321.5 total million budget designated for the three sectors of the CSCU (community colleges, state college and state universities) goes directly to those institutions (12 community colleges, 4 CSUs and Charter Oak), and that only \$408,000 was in addition designated for central activities – that of the Board of Regents --, presumably to cover the costs of its secretary and assistants, as well as coffee and muffins when it met in person¹.

That was my impression until I joined the Finance Committee and looked at more detailed spreadsheets, which provide a fuller picture of the sums of money going to the System Office or controlled by it. In fact that sum, as proposed for 2021 is \$69.1 million dollars (Finance Packet of 10/07/2020, p. 21 or 7t, subsequently approved by the BOR at its Dec. meeting), a sum deducted from the total allocated to two of the three sectors (excluding Charter Oak which is very small in comparison to the other two sectors and handles all of its administration locally).²

¹ The remaining \$14 million of the total budget goes to miscellaneous items – of which the largest are Developmental Services (\$8.9 million) and Workman’s Compensation claims (\$3.3 million).

² Whereas in June 2020, there were three line items for what I will term the central level of the CSCU: \$2.85 million for services and expenses of the System Office for the current community colleges, and a new line of \$38.64 million for the proposed one community college which has a name (Connecticut State Community College), an interim President, Provost, Vice Presidents and CFO, as well as three regional Presidents (at a cost of over \$1 million per year), but no accreditation, students or classes. As well, \$12.76 million was designated for System Office staff and services to the four CSUs, a figure fairly constant over the years. In the October 2020 budget statement, a fourth line item of central funding was included: Shared Services, at \$37.13 million, with \$2.68 million for the existing community colleges (CCC line item), \$16.52 million for the currently non-existent one community college (CSCU) and \$12.73 million for the four universities (CSUs), for a total of \$69.06 million, a 27.3% increase over the budget for centralized control just 4 months earlier.

In fact, since 2017 when Students First was initiated, the budget directly controlled by the central authorities at the System Office has more than doubled, from \$30.33 million to \$69.06 million, as the number of line items has doubled (from 2 to 4), and the levels of administration at the community colleges has also doubled, with the addition of regional presidents and an interim one college president, inserted between the existing college CEOs (formerly presidents) and the CSCU President (for whom a search is currently underway). So too has the number of system offices, with a new system office for the non-existent one community college planned for New Britain and currently being staffed (in addition to the current system office in Hartford).

All of this is to indicate my support for HR 5545 to include explicitly in terms of its line items the budget of the “central office of the CSCU”. Otherwise the governor’s and state budgets give the impression that a mere \$408,000 is designated for “central activities” (the BOR budget), but neglects to specify the sum 172 times that amount devoted to budget controlled by the central authorities of CSCU either directly for System Office salaries and expenses or for items controlled by them. Having a more transparent budget will clearly indicate this item and will allow for a debate on the advisability, or not of this over-centralization of budget funds.

2/ I want to speak in favor of HB 6403, “AN ACT REQUIRING LEGISLATIVE APPROVAL FOR THE MERGER OR CLOSING OF INSTITUTIONS WITHIN THE CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.” This bill specifies the concurrent majorities to be required in both houses of the legislature for “recommended merger or closing” of an institution or institutions within the CSCU, and reinforces the current measures -- 2/3 vote of the Board and notice to the appropriate General Assembly standing committee--. both of which are inadequate to prevent precipitous actions by the Board in applying System Office proposals in Students First.

I would go further and suggest that the current section 185 of the State Statutes already *requires* a vote of the legislature for the proposed merger of all community colleges into one. Specifically, section 10a-1 would have to be modified to remove the reference to “the regional community-technical colleges” at subsection 2(B), as would references in sections 10a-3 (a) and (c) on the Student Advisory Committee, section 10a-3a(c) on the Faculty Advisory Committee, and section 10a-6 subsections (4) and (7) on the Duties of the Board of Regents.

Moreover, in section 10a-6 subsection (5) dealing with the power of the Board to “merge or close institutions” within ... the regional community-technical college system”, it is nowhere stated that this power extends to eliminating the whole system by merging all of the colleges into one. On my view the quantifier implicit in this section is “some”, and not “all”, and to move to merge all would require action beyond that allowed in this subsection. The measures proposed in the Bill specify the additional legislative action required to make sure that the interests of the state and its residents are fully considered, and to avoid precipitous action by the Board which might jeopardize accreditation by our regional agency.

3/ I want to speak in favor of HR 997: “AN ACT CONCERNING AN EXPANSION OF THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT AND THE VOTING RIGHTS OF THE FACULTY MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION” as concerns that part of which I have direct knowledge: to establish voting rights for the faculty members of the Board of Regents, of which I am one. Section 185 of the statutes

of the State established the Faculty Advisory Board to the Board of Regents (section 10a-3a), with the mandate to “assist the board in performing its statutory functions” (subsection a). The same is stipulated for the parallel Student Advisory Board (section 10-3). However, the SAC Chair and Vice-Chair are ex-officio voting members of the Board, but the faculty are non-voting members (Sec 10a-1a). This discrepancy poses a significant problem for the Chair and Vice-Chair of the FAC in “assisting the board in performing its statutory functions” as they cannot propose amendments to matters before the Board where they have special cognizance, or present regular reports from the FAC at meetings of the Board. There are numerous state boards where faculty members have votes (eg: California State system, Univ. of Kentucky, Florida)

A recent item in this regard was the December 2020 budget amendment proposed to the Board by the Finance Committee Chair and the system CFO, a proposal which had not gone before the full committee. It mandated a \$8 million budget cut at the four CSU universities, and moreover, specified the amounts to be reduced at each university in terms of part time funding and funding for university assistants and graduate assistants. As a long time faculty member and former chair of the university Planning and Budget Committee, I knew that these directed cuts were detrimental to student access to courses (cutting up to 100 sections), and adversely affected the least paid and most vulnerable members of the university community, involving reductions of up to 10% of university assistants and 2/3 of graduate assistants.

But as a non-voting member of the Board, I could only protest, and was ruled out of order when I proposed an amendment to send the proposal back to the Finance Committee for further vetting and consultation with the university Presidents in order to determine better ways to make the overall cuts that would not adversely affect students. As a voting member I think my amendment would have passed and obviated the needless negative effects (partially mitigated when the university CFOs also objected and requested some flexibility in application).

There is one asymmetry between students and faculty we all recognize: students pay for their education; faculty are paid to provide that education. I see this reflected in the Bill at lines 145 – 148 which exclude the proposed voting Faculty Advisory Committee Chair and Co-chair from executive sessions of the Board (concerned with employee issues) and voting on “matters related to the collective bargaining negotiation or agreements”. This would prevent conflict of interest of faculty voting on monetary or individual personnel matters directly affecting them, and is a positive safeguard with which I am in agreement.